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Communicating with People with Dementia

***Imagine:** You've just stepped off a plane into a foreign country. You've never seen anything like this country and everything is new. Some natives come up to you and speak in what sounds like questioning phrases, but you can't understand what they are saying. You have to use the bathroom after your long flight and ask where the restroom is, but no one seems to understand what you are saying. As you gesture, their eyes light up and you think you've made your point, and someone comes running bringing you a bowl of soup. You are becoming frustrated at your inability to communicate in their language. You desperately hope someone around will be able to translate and make sense of all that is going on around you in this foreign world.*

The brief scenario above is just a small example of how it feels to have Alzheimer's disease and to lose the ability to communicate effectively through language.

Language will increasingly become less reliable as dementia progresses, both in understanding what is being said to the person with dementia and in their ability to use words and sentences to express themselves through ideas and thoughts.

People with dementia may misunderstand what is being said; they may substitute a word with one that has another meaning entirely. They may have word finding difficulties so severe that they cannot begin to formulate a sentence.

Eventually, most people with Alzheimer's disease will become non-verbal. However, it is important to remember that language skills are affected differently for everyone who experiences Alzheimer's, as each person has a unique progression through dementia.

These deficits in language often compound the problem for caregivers. Many are already dealing with short-term memory loss, inability to think abstractly, a complete lack of understanding time, as well as other cognitive difficulties in areas like reasoning and judgment.

We rely so heavily on language that we often carry on a conversation assuming that others around us understand everything we say. We speak our minds, and often trace our thought process out loud, making our sentences even



more complex and difficult to understand for someone who is beginning to experience language difficulties.

Despite the challenges, you can communicate effectively with a loved one who has Alzheimer's. Consider these tips provided by the Mayo Clinic:

Speak clearly. Introduce yourself. Speak in a clear, straightforward manner.

Show respect. Avoid secondary baby talk and diminutive phrases, such as "good girl." Don't assume that your loved one can't understand you, and don't talk about your loved one as though he or she weren't there.

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Caregiver Tips**For better communication:**

- 💡 Let the person know you are listening and trying to understand what is being said.
- 💡 Keep good eye contact. Show the person that you care about what is being said.
- 💡 Avoid criticizing, correcting and arguing.
- 💡 If the person uses the wrong word or cannot find a word, try guessing the right one.
- 💡 If you don't understand what is being said, ask the person to point or gesture.
- 💡 Focus on the feelings, not the facts. Sometimes the emotions being expressed are more important than what is being said. Look for the feelings behind the words.
- 💡 Ask one question at a time.
- 💡 Patiently wait for a response. A person may need extra time to process your request.
- 💡 Repeat information and questions. If the person doesn't respond, wait a moment. Then ask again.
- 💡 Avoid quizzing. Reminiscing can be healthy, but avoid asking, "Do you remember when...?"
- 💡 Give simple explanations. Avoid using logic and reason at great length. Give a complete response in a clear and concise way.

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Show interest. Maintain eye contact, and stay near your loved one so that he or she will know that you're listening and trying to understand.

Avoid distractions. Communication may be difficult — if not impossible — against a background of competing sights and sounds.

Keep it simple. Use short sentences and plain words. Ask yes-no questions, and ask only one question at a time. Break down tasks or requests into single steps.

Don't interrupt. It may take several minutes for your loved one to respond. Avoid criticizing, hurrying and correcting.

Use visual cues. Sometimes gestures or other visual cues promote better understanding than words alone. Rather than simply asking if your loved one needs to use the bathroom, for example, take him or her to the toilet.

Don't argue. Your loved one's reasoning and judgment will decline over time. To spare anger and agitation, don't argue with your loved one.

Stay calm. Even when you're frustrated, keep your voice gentle. Your nonverbal cues, including the tone of your voice, may send a clearer message than what you actually say.



Communicating with your loved one may be challenging, especially as the disease progresses. Remember, however, your loved one isn't acting this way on purpose. Don't take it personally. Use patience and understanding to help your loved one feel safe and secure.

**Helpful Resources:**

- **“Communication, Best ways to interact with the person with dementia”** - free publication of the Alzheimer's Association available at your local office or on the web at http://www.alz.org/national/documents/brochure_communication.pdf
- **Mayo Clinic**, <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/alzheimers/AZ00004>
- **The Alzheimer's Store**, <http://alzstore.com/> - offers a variety of tools to improve communications, including signs and picture-keys phones.
- **“The Best Friends Staff, Building a Culture of Care in Alzheimer's Programs”**, by Virginia Bell and David Troxel.
- **“Learning to Speak Alzheimer's: A Groundbreaking Approach for Everyone Dealing with the Disease,”** by Joanne Koenig Coste.

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